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The wonderful art of comparing leeks and bananas: reviewing sustainability actions to empower transformation (0233)

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Abstract

This paper reports research aiming to discover perceptions of ‘sustainability’. Individuals are encouraged to explore their interpretations and establish importance and relevance of presented concepts to their situation. The paper discusses findings from the first of several workshops with higher education staff and students. Conducting the same workshop in several settings expansive data will result; developing an understanding of interpretations of sustainability and the collation of sustainability actions.

Interpretations of sustainability were discussed, in the real or abstract sense, and sustainable projects in Welsh and Brazilian higher education presented. Participants ranked the projects, which resulted in exchanging alternative approaches to the sustainability agenda. The initial findings reflect diversity of interpretations of sustainability and present the difficulty of prioritising educating for sustainability or sustainable practices. The process reflects the possible complexities of prioritising such actions which could strongly influence the learning experiences and future decisions of students in higher education.

Introduction

Currently the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) is underway and endeavours to integrate sustainable development into all education sectors. This paper explores the concept of sustainability and its boundaries, which influence both staff and student decisions and experiences within higher education. It draws on current practices led by universities in different contexts, Wales and Brazil. This aims to demonstrate that sustainability can mean different things and that there are various ways of engaging with students and staff. Findings discussed were a result of a workshop which included the use of images, allowing participants to explore personal interpretations of sustainability and determine the importance and relevance of presented concepts to their department and institution. The intention of the workshop was for participants to decide on possible paths their department and institution could engage in towards sustainability by reflecting on priorities for effective action within their institution. The intention is also to continue to encourage critical thinking regarding understanding and interpretation of the terms 'sustainability' and 'Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship'.

Background and context

Sustainable development has been defined as 'an essentially contestable concept, in the sense that no authoritative, universally valid definition can be formulated. There is no way of determining what is 'really sustainable' other than through processes of collective and contextual deliberation and mutual learning' (Loeber, Grin and Leeuwis. 2007, p. 84). Loeber et al. (2007) also state that the concept of sustainable development involves processes requiring value judgements. Orr (1994) and Martin and Jucker (2003) identify higher education as guilty of producing people who contribute to unsustainable practices. However, others comment that higher education encounters difficulties in progressing such an agenda due to the constraints of an unsustainable society (Clugston, 2004, p. x). Nevertheless Clugston proposes that practical examples from different cultures, as well as reflection on the transformation required, will prove positive.

Wales and Brazil provide the locations for the different cultural examples presented to workshop participants. Studying existing actions allows individuals to reorient and innovate activities within their campus and curriculum. Diniz and Glover (2010) summarize major developments of Education for Sustainable Development within Brazil and Wales. In Brazil the routes are strongly linked to the evolution of Environmental Education, which was introduced to support a national environmental policy in 1988 and recognised the right for all Brazilian citizens to receive Environmental Education. Thus encouraging public awareness and promoting Environmental Education within all education sectors (SECAD/MEC, 2007, p.19). However, the role of higher education within this agenda has not received much attention (Diniz and Glover, 2010), until in 2006 a study investigating actions and projects within the sector highlighted that frequently it was spontaneous drives for social responsibility which dominated initiatives as opposed to official institutional policies (SECAD/MEC, 2007).

In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the United Kingdom's shared framework for sustainable development (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006,

p. 30, 2008, p. 53, 2009a, p. 51). Since 1988 the school curriculum has included sustainable development and global citizenship. Within the higher education sector the autonomy of the curriculum means sustainability issues are not mandatory. However, the Welsh Assembly Government proposes sustainability be incorporated within all organisations as a central organising principle (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009b). Since 2006 there has been a succession of publications from the Assembly Government; Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) – A Strategy for Action (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006; 2008 and 2009a). Welsh Assembly Government funded audits of the higher education ESDGC curriculum content and environmental management systems review were conducted in 2008. The outcomes of the audits reflect much action within the sector and propose many recommendations for future actions. One such action proposes enhancing staff training and creating teaching materials to support a cross disciplinary approach (The Higher Education Academy, 2009, p. 13).

Results

The initial workshop was conducted during a conference at the University of Wales, Newport, and consisted of twelve participants drawn from different sections of the university (management, administration, academic and library). Images provoked initial ideas for individual interpretations of sustainability. Figure 1 illustrates some of the images selected by participants to reflect their interpretations of sustainability. Feedback reflected differing perspectives such as; ‘hope for the future, that the next generation will experience longevity of life; traditional methods mixing with more up to date technology; we think everything will be alright if we stockpile resources; development today cannot continue at its current rate and the unexpected maybe provides solutions’.



Figure 1. Selection of images chosen by participants to reflect interpretations of sustainability

After brief presentations of effective practices across Brazil and Wales, see Diniz and Glover (2010) for summary; participants attempted to rank the practices in a diamond, from the most to least important. Figure 2 illustrates four outcomes. It can be observed that two of groups chose not to follow diamond ranking accurately; much debate existed concerning exactly what defines ‘importance’; whether it is that which has the most impact; short term or long term; locally or globally; or direct or indirect impact.



Figure 2. Ranking sustainability practices

Nevertheless it is notable that, at this first workshop in Wales, the example of teaching the module ‘Living Sustainably’ dominated the top of the rankings, with a project to protect biodiversity also viewed highly. The choice not to prioritise one action above others also reflected the difficulties groups encountered in agreeing the most important and their interpretation of ‘importance’. Maybe it was not surprising that an initiative emphasising education for sustainability ranked consistently highly as the majority of participants are directly involved in this field. This does reiterate the importance of education in transforming actions identified by some (Orr, 1994;

Cortese, 1999). All participants were enthusiastic about sharing initiatives they perceived as successful and this ongoing research aims to collate and disseminate effective practices to enable further creativity and innovation as institutions explore and develop future projects.

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